

# Anxiety, Stress, & Nerves:

Strategies for before, during,  
and after a performance

© MEGAN LANZ 2023 [www.meganlanzflute.com](http://www.meganlanzflute.com)



# Introduction

---

ALL THE INFORMATION IN THIS BOOKLET PROVIDES OPTIONS FOR YOU TO CONSIDER IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO MITIGATE ANXIETY, STRESS, AND NERVES - IN YOUR LIVES AND ON THE STAGE (WHETHER SOLO OR IN AN ENSEMBLE OF ANY SIZE). PLEASE, BRING QUESTIONS TO YOUR LESSONS OR EMAIL ME! I AM HAPPY TO CONTINUE THE DISCUSSION AND WALK YOU THROUGH ANY OF THE INFORMATION IN THIS BOOKLET.

Welcome to an ongoing discussion about how we feel about our activities and commitments, the pressures we put ourselves under, the expectations we have for ourselves, the expectations others have for us, our desires to excel and thrive, and SO many other components of being a human musician in this world.



We were all drawn to music as an activity and method of self-expression for a wide variety of reasons. Perhaps you love the experience of working and playing music with a group of people - it's an amazing feeling! Perhaps you love being able to express yourself through music because it is a medium that transcends the limitations of language. Perhaps you love excelling, solving problems, tackling challenges, or a hundred other possibilities.



Thank you for being here - the music world is richer with you in it. Let's make sure anxiety, stress, and nerves are not things that hold you back!



Megan Lanz, DMA



# Before the Day

---

## CONSIDER WHAT YOU'LL NEED

What will you need while you perform or record?

Examples include:

- A water bottle
- A pencil to make notes for each take
- A trinket to be used as a reminder to stay present, or to represent anything else you've assigned as its meaning
- A sticky note reminding you of your "why" – why are you there? Why are you involved?

*The pages of this booklet will provide ideas to consider when you are actively performing, auditioning, or recording.*

## VISUALIZE

What will the room you'll be in look like? Will you be on a stage? What does that space feel like? If you close your eyes and picture yourself in that space, what feelings pop up? Are you excited? Are you invigorated? Are you nervous? Do you feel scared with uncertainty?

These visualizations are some of the best preparations you can do for yourself. Emotions that pop up while you visualize are emotions you can prepare for so they don't surprise you in the moment. When you aren't surprised, things make more sense and feel more familiar, making them easier to manage.



## HEADS UP!

Don't underestimate the importance of thinking ahead to what you might need and mentally walking yourself through your performance, audition, or recording session.

A prepared brain that feels familiarity in a situation is a brain that panics less. It might seem so simple, and you might not notice any benefit from it if you don't have a performance right away. Trust the process.

# Your “Why”

(AKA your sense of purpose)

01

What  
is  
this?

We each thrive when we have a sense of purpose, and pursuing something with purpose is more fulfilling. What motivates you to take part in performing on an instrument? Write your thoughts here:

---

---

Fulfillment comes from succeeding, but also in offering something valuable to other people. Success comes from a mindset that is based on you understanding what you are doing and why. If you can find both of these together into one activity, what a win!

02

The  
Big  
Picture

Think big, not small. Your “why” is not to get first chair, to get into an honor band, to outperform your peer, etc. Sure, these achievements feel validating, but that is not *why* you started and continue to play. Your why includes considering how what you are doing changes your life, as well as the lives of those around you.

What does music do for you?

---

What have you noticed your music does for others?

---

03

Define  
it!

Use the thoughts you’ve gathered thus far and start drafting some ideas here. Why do you play music?

---

---

---

Take these ideas and assess: are they big picture? Do they feel like they could apply to your music in any situation? If so, you might have uncovered your “why” (or at least one of them)! Use this as an anchor when you are experiencing anxiety, stress, and/or nerves.



# Fear or Excitement?



OUR SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEMS HAVE ONLY A LIMITED NUMBER OF WAYS TO COMMUNICATE WITH US. DO YOU LIKE ROLLER COASTERS, OR FEAR THEM? THE STOMACH-FLIPPING, TINGLY LIMBS, SHAKING KNEES, AND DILATED PUPILS WE FEEL IN TIMES OF STRESS ARE THE SAME THINGS WE FEEL WHEN WE ARE EXCITED. FRAMING YOUR EXPERIENCE MATTERS.

In music, the truth when it comes to comparing excitement to fear (non-life-threatening fear, of course!) often comes down to one big thing: how are you going to choose to approach the situation at hand?

Our fight, flight, or freeze responses have served us very well throughout our evolutionary history. Encountering a saber-toothed tiger while hunting or gathering? Cue the adrenaline so we have energy to either fight or run and try to escape! That's all wonderfully helpful, but our bodies still use these same responses in our modern day world. Standing on a stage and becoming petrified of judgment for making mistakes is quite different from running to save our lives (although you might wish you could run away in that moment under the spotlight).

When performing music, we are intentionally asking our bodies to stand still. To stay relaxed. To breathe as dictated by the music. If we don't need to run for our lives or fight a saber-toothed tiger, but our hearts are

pumping and our bodies are full of adrenaline, how can we process this extra adrenaline?

One of the many answers: Hold onto your "why" and breathe deeply. Breathing slowly and deeply, while reminding yourself of *why* you are there, will encourage your heart rate to slow and your body to come back to a more neutral state.

Another answer, used in combination with breathing: frame your experience in a way that is helpful. You might be scared, yes, but are you also excited? Do you enjoy collaborating? Are you proud of the work you've done? Do you love the style of music you get to play? Focus on any of these and help yourself see the larger picture. Eventually, the excitement will begin to become a more dominant experience.

Above all, remember that you are more than what you do. YOU ARE NOT DEFINED BY THE WAY YOU PLAY.



# During the Performance

---

## CHECK IN WITH YOUR BODY

All experiences and emotions come with physical feelings. Our bodies talk just as much as our voices can – we just need to listen. Where are you feeling sensations? If you're nervous, where does your body store those sensations? Arms? Legs? Jaw? Hands? Shoulders? Can you be kind to these areas and encourage them to allow you to do what you're there to do?

We are not doomed to be stuck with our body's physiological responses. Using breathing, we can influence our heart rates and help reduce shaking as a result. The bonus? When your body isn't being ordered around by your fight or flight responses, your mind doesn't worry as much.

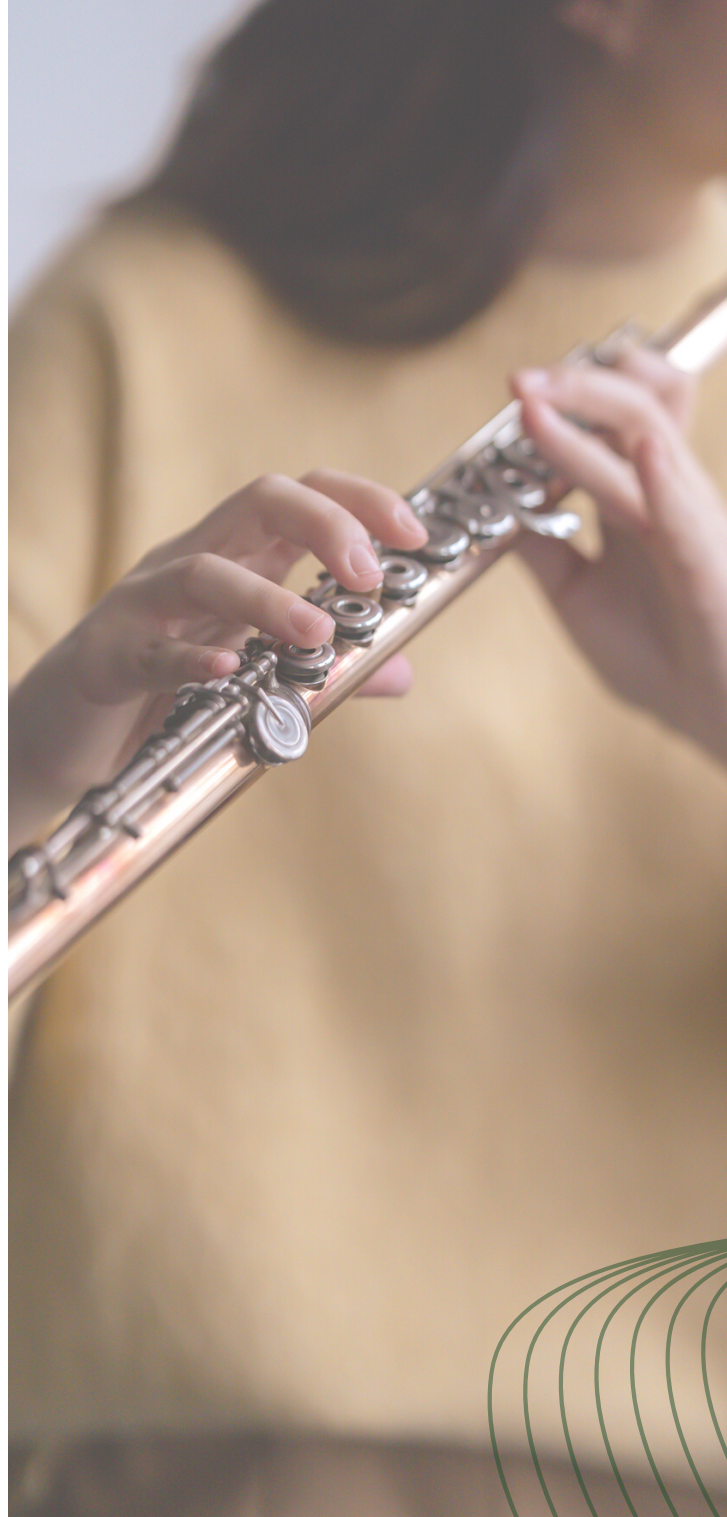
## OBSERVE YOUR CONCERNS

Your concerns can tell you a lot about yourself.

- "What will people think?"
- "I won't be as good as I was in practice."
- "I won't get the result I wanted."

These types of concerns tell us that we care what others think, we care about how we represent ourselves, and we care about the outcome. **They are also helpful because they inform us of what we can focus on *before* a performance.**

Remember, the outcome isn't about that individual moment as much as it is about how we prepare – not just by practicing, but also by preparing ourselves mentally and emotionally.



## WHAT IS REALLY HAPPENING?

Frequently, there is a difference between what our worries tell us is happening and what is actually happening. Can you see the situation as a third party would? Can you separate yourself from your worries or nerves and assess, without classifying something as positive or negative?



# Relaxing at the Stand

---

## 1 NOTICE

Perhaps you're tense or nervous. Take a moment to notice how an emotion manifests itself within your body. Where do you feel it the most? Abdomen? Arms? Knees? Jaw? Each body is different. Do you feel tension in these places, a tingling, tightness, cold or heat, or something else?

## 2 LISTEN

Where is your mind? What is your inner voice saying? Is it possible you're adding tension by treating your inner voice as a truth-teller? Our inner voices often speak to our fears unless we guide them. Nerves are not our enemies - they just happen. Our inner voices cannot be avoided - but we can redirect them!

## 3 BREATHE & SOFTEN

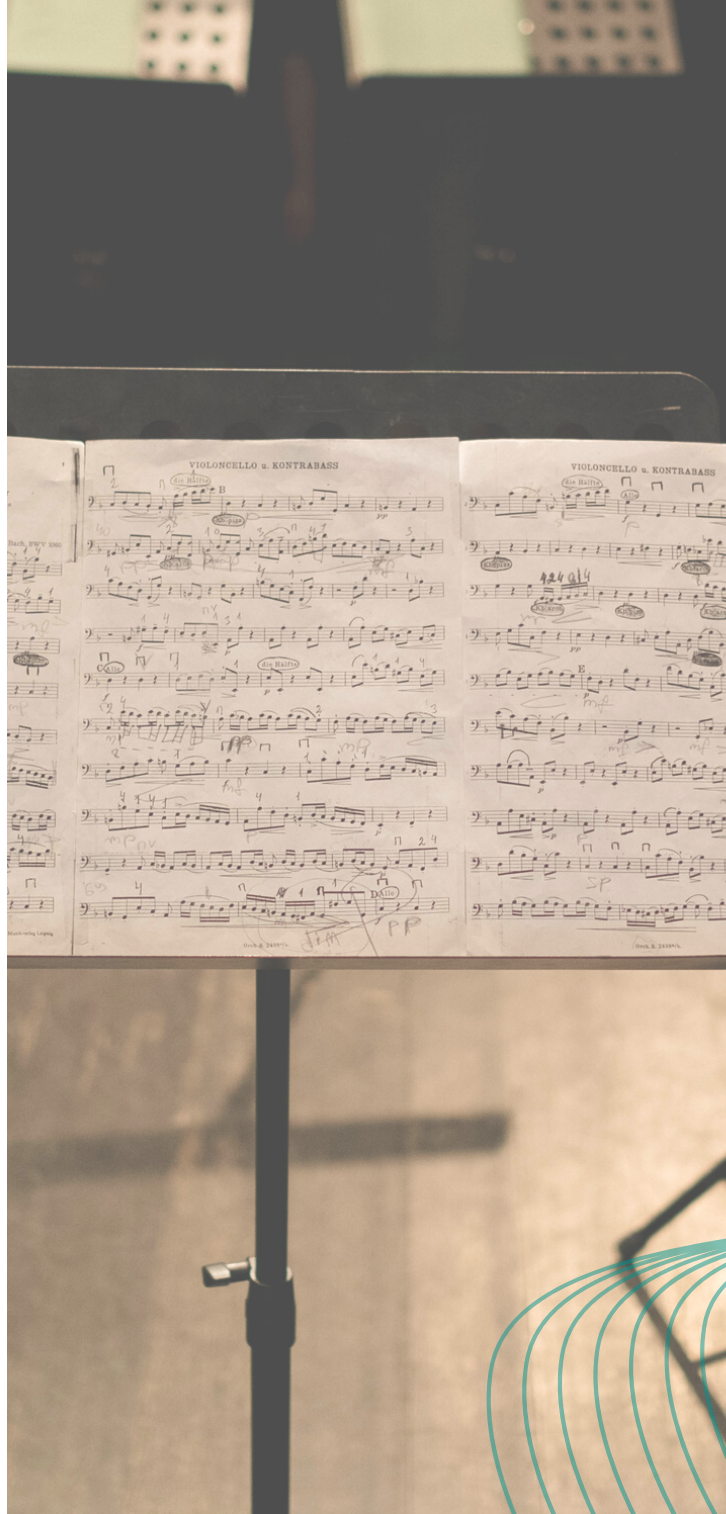
Breathing is one of our most effective ways of managing runaway emotions and calming our body's physical responses to stressful situations. Take a moment to breathe slowly and fully, and direct the breath toward the areas where your body is holding tension or anxiety.

## 4 VISUALIZE

Visualize each of the areas of your body that are holding tension or anxiety, and allow them to relax as you breathe. If it helps, imagine treating each area kindly. Try to make each breath calmer than the previous one.

## 5 PERFORM

Try to maintain this relaxed and present feeling while you perform. You can repeat the cycle as your performance progresses and as you want to reset in rests or in between movements or pieces.



### TIP: REFER BACK TO YOUR "WHY" IF IT HELPS IN THE MOMENT!

One reason to have your "why" defined (evenly loosely) is to be able to refer to it in times of stress. Reminding yourself of why you are doing what you're doing can put your experience into a larger perspective, which puts less pressure on one individual event or moment. That doesn't mean those moments don't matter, but our journeys are made of many moments combined.

# The BRFWA Cycle

ALL emotions have a finite life span. There is an onset, a growth, peak, diminishment, and resolution. Fighting any emotion or experience will only amplify uncomfortable feelings. So, why not allow them to be? Allowing something implies you have ownership over it, and it is such a liberating word. Practicing this cycle in various circumstances will help it become more comfortable and familiar in more stressful and high pressure situations. Give it a try!

## BREATHE. RELAX. FEEL. WATCH. ALLOW.

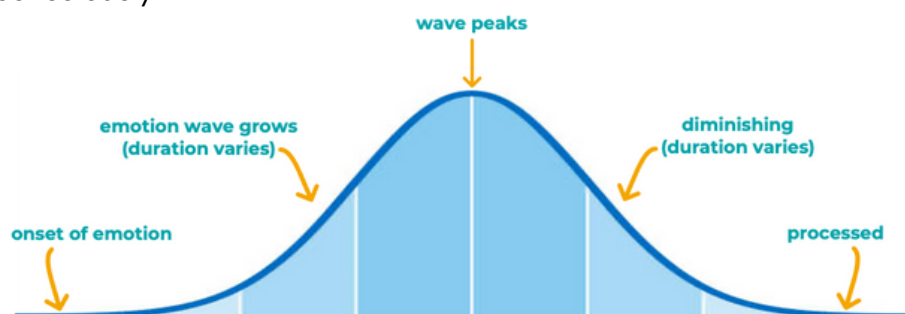
**Breathe:** Notice the location, temperature, and depth of a feeling. It is much more multi-faceted than you may think.

**Relax:** Are you holding? Give yourself permission to release any muscles that are stiff or any joints that are locked. They are not doing you any favors, and actually contribute *more* to your stress.

**Feel:** How and where do you feel your emotions? Does your body register tingling? Temperature? Numbness? Your body is trying to talk to you. What's its language?

**Watch:** Observe yourself as an outsider would. What advice would you give your best friend or a sibling? Don't forget that we need kindness and understanding from ourselves.

**Allow:** Allow your feelings to be what they are - fighting them will not make them change or go away (in fact, they might minimize themselves). Once you allow them to exist, respond consciously.



*The life of an emotional experience*





# After

---

## DISTANCE

It is a good idea to put some time between your performance or audition before you assess and nitpick. We are taught to notice what needs changing, improving, or modifying in our music, and those types of observations are usually the first to come to mind in the moments right after one of these higher pressure events. Give yourself some time before digging in.

## REFLECT

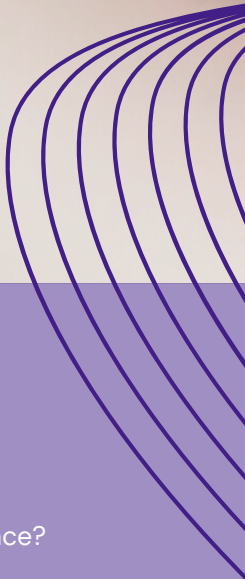
When you give yourself the time to reflect on an experience, try to see those moments as objectively as possible. It's not always about what needs fixing. What went well? What surprised you? Were there any mistakes that happened that surprised you? Do you know why they happened? Think through everything from as many angles as is helpful.

© MEGAN LANZ 2023 www.meganzflute.com

## PLAN

After you have reflected, it's time to make a plan!

- Did you notice something you changed with your practice that helped in your last performance? Great! Do more of that, and continue to refine that process.
- Did your bodily responses to stress make things more difficult? Make a plan to put yourself in more situations so you can get a feeling for your body's default reactions. Get to know those feelings, and start considering them as mere indicators. These feelings are not your enemies – they are providing you information.
- What would you like to work on now? If you have no impending performances or auditions, this is the perfect time to dig in and get creative.





Miyazawa Performing Artist Megan Lanz (DMA/CMI) performs regularly as a solo artist and chamber musician. As a pedagogue, she finds great joy and fulfillment in helping students make the connection between the musical and physical components of playing an instrument. Her holistic performance and pedagogical approaches encompass all physical, mental, and emotional components of being a human musician.